

Research, Theory, and Practice Within Academic Affairs

# **Escape the Cape, From Existing to Evolving**

**Amplifying Voices of Black and Brown Women in  
the Mental Health Profession**



**Tasha M. Wilson**

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# **Research, Theory, and Practice Within Academic Affairs**

Series Editors

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*Edited by*

**Tasha M. Wilson**

*Anne Arundel Community College, USA*



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# CONTENTS

About the Editor .....	vii
About the Contributors.....	ix
Introduction.....	xvii
<b>1</b> A Loving Invitation to Black Women: (Re)Connecting to Ourselves Through the Embodiments of Healing Justice.....	1
<i>Alexis E. Hunter</i>	
<b>2</b> The Art of Showing Up for and By Women of Color .....	9
<i>Cassandra Guzman</i>	
<b>3</b> Help, I Am Over This! .....	17
<i>Natasha Booker</i>	
<b>4</b> “For Melanated Women: Lit but Burned Out” .....	23
<i>Qutina Watson</i>	
<b>5</b> “But You Make It Look Easy”: Overworked, Underpaid, Thrice as Good, and Walking Away.....	31
<i>Brittany Smotherson</i>	
<b>6</b> Strong Black Women Cry: Finding Academic Wholeness .....	39
<i>Jennifer N. Bacon</i>	
<b>7</b> Coloring in the Blackout Days.....	51
<i>Natina R. Gurley</i>	
<b>8</b> There’s Beauty in Vulnerability Within the Workplace .....	59
<i>Cassandra Guzman</i>	

9	Our Voices Matter: The Lived Experiences of Black Women Seeking Career Advancement.....	65
	<i>Arah Parker</i>	
10	When the Cape Gets Too Heavy: Strategies for Navigating Superhumanization at Home and Work .....	73
	<i>Courtney J. Jones Carney and Neijma Celestine-Donnor</i>	
11	VF Burnout.....	83
	<i>Lindsey Hamilton</i>	
12	“No Hay Mal Que Por Bien No Venga”: Learning Your Worth, Learning it Is Okay to Ask for Help, and the Importance of Finding Your Circle .....	91
	<i>Jennifer Alanis, Leticia Romo and Jami Hinshaw</i>	
13	I Don’t Wear Capes That Clash With My Wardrobe! .....	99
	<i>Deborah D. Ford</i>	
14	No Weapon Formed Against us Shall Prosper: An Accounting of Weaponized Self-Care and Using it as a Weapon .....	107
	<i>Avina I. Ross and Heather Cramer</i>	
15	Removing the Cape–Sometimes .....	117
	<i>Latonia V. Moss</i>	
16	Victory Through Vulnerability .....	125
	<i>Laquala C. Dixon</i>	
17	Still a Superwoman on My Terms Exchanging the Superwoman Robe for More Comfortable and Relaxed Garments.....	131
	<i>Jennifer Malone</i>	

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## ABOUT THE EDITOR

**Tasha M. Wilson**, MSW, MEd is the visionary of *Escape the Cape: From Existing to Evolving*. She is a Maryland native who values the transformative power of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Tasha is an innovative change agent with expertise spanning in policy implementation, employee relations, and compliance. Tasha enjoys strategically solving problems, developing new relationships, and contributing to the growth of organizations. She is a subject matter expert in succession planning, crisis intervention, leadership development, and project management. Currently, Tasha has a career in local government.

Outside of her role in local government, Tasha is one of today's identifiable trailblazers for millennial women. As an international bestselling author and speaker she uses her past experiences as a springboard to inspire others to break glass ceilings, transform their pain into power and rediscover who they are beyond their trauma. One of her books is utilized on the campus of Johnson C. Smith University as a discussion guide for undergraduate students and emerging leaders. Her work has earned her awards for community activism and placed her on platforms across the globe. She was featured in *VoyageBaltimore Magazine*, *BOLD Journey Magazine*, and *CanvasRebel Magazine*. In 2015, Tasha founded the Royalty Refined Movement, a community network that fosters sisterhood centered around self-discovery, personal development, and autonomy. In 2021, she served on Grammy Award-winner Michelle Williams' launch team for the book *Checking In*. In 2022, she was honored as one of Maryland's Christian Women in Leadership recipients and received the Marketplace Forerunner Award.

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## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

**Jennifer Alanis, EdD** (she/her/Ella) is a first-generation Mexican American and a justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) leader; she seeks to improve the campus climate of any institution she is a part of. She does this by creating shared learning experiences, equitable policies, and building collaborative relationships that challenge barriers, bring forth diverse dialogue, and provide educational opportunities. Dr. Alanis is the Interim Executive Director of the Taylor Family Center for Student Success at Washington University in St. Louis. Dr. Alanis is involved at regional and national levels for the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), and Alpha Psi Lambda National, Inc. She has also sailed on three voyages of Semester at Sea. Dr. Alanis is from Chicago, the mother of four, and the wife of a Bronze Star military veteran.

**Jennifer N. Bacon, PhD** earned her PhD in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Maryland, College Park, and her MEd in Special Education from the University of Virginia. Dr. Bacon is Core Doctoral Faculty in Human and Organizational Development at Fielding Graduate University. She has also served as a Core Associate Professor, Department Chair in Education, and Associate Dean. In addition to her in-depth experience in education, she is an interfaith minister trained in the use of poetry therapy, spiritual guidance, and yoga. Deeply committed to addressing racial and gender equity, and writing for social justice, healing, and transformation, she participates in a number of professional associations, mentoring organizations, writing projects, and research work. Dr. Bacon is a successful published author.

**Neijma Celestine-Donnor (she/her), JD, MSW, LCSW-C**, is the Associate Dean for Strategic Initiatives and Organizational Engagement at the University of Maryland, Baltimore School of Social Work. In this role, she

provides leadership on school-wide strategic efforts and serves as a key collaborator with the Dean. As a member of the Dean's leadership team, Neijma plays a central role in supporting organizational planning, engagement, and change initiatives. With both a Juris Doctor (JD) and a Master of Social Work (MSW), she brings a multidisciplinary perspective to her work, combining legal insight with clinical and organizational experience. Over the past decade, Neijma has led numerous initiatives focused on leadership development, planning, facilitation, and capacity-building across higher education and human services organizations. She is recognized for her thoughtful, collaborative approach to leadership and her ability to guide complex institutional efforts with clarity and purpose.

**Heather Cramer (she|her|hers), BA** is originally from Gloucester, Virginia. She is the daughter of Paul and Karin and the mother of Dominic Mason. She is the oldest of five children and a graduate from Notre Dame of Maryland University, formally known as the College of Notre Dame of Maryland. Heather lives with her partner and her son in Virginia. She is an accomplished probation officer and has served the Commonwealth of Virginia for 15 years in community corrections. Prior to that, Heather worked as an advocate for survivors of domestic violence. Heather loves dogs and owns a rescue pit bull named Jamaica, who is a heal your heart dog. Heather loves to sing, help people, and mentor in her professional field. She is passionate about all things karaoke and enjoys spending time with family and friends as much as she can.

**Laquala C. Dixon, PhD** hails from Flint, Michigan. Dr. Dixon takes pride in advocating for historically excluded populations. She has served in numerous capacities in Higher Education, in addition to having experience outside of the field as a social worker. In the same way, Laquala enjoys writing and research. She recently published a journal article titled Understanding the Interlocking Oppressive Systems Within Higher Education Restricting the Professional Progression of Black Women (Spring 2023). Similarly, she is actively involved with the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). Lastly, Dr. Dixon was recently selected as a member of the inaugural Jackson State University Alumni 40 Under 40 class (fall 2023). Finally, Dr. Dixon acquired her bachelor's degree in Sociology, a Master's Degree in College Student Affairs Leadership and a doctoral degree in Higher Education. She is the proud life partner to De'Suan Dixon, PhD, and they have one son.

**Deborah D. Ford, PhD, MA, BA**, is originally from Brooklyn, NY. In 2025, she earned her PhD in General Psychology at Capella University. She is an alumna of Clark Atlanta University (Mass Media Arts) and New York University (Speech & Interpersonal Communication). Deborah D. Ford has taught

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**Natina R. Gurley, MS** worked alchemist. woman. daughter. sister. god-mother. human. educator. writer. activist. lover. scientist. runner. goofball. As a residence life professional, Natina worked on various university campuses across the United States specializing in residential curriculum development; staff training and development; residential and university-wide programming; and mentorship programs. In 2019, Natina transitioned out of higher education, allowing her the opportunity to celebrate her birthday, and live a healthier and full life as an elderly millennial. A weather-tested leader; team developer; and diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging strategist, Natina’s professional joys include partnering with people leaders to advance inclusion and belonging goals; devising engaging learning and development experiences; and embracing the future of work at the virtual water-cooler. Natina received her BS from the University of California, at Los Angeles and MS from the University of Central Arkansas. Born in East Texas, Natina now resides in the San Francisco Bay Area.

**Cassandra Guzman (she/ella), PhD** is a West Coast transplant originally from Los Angeles, CA. After completing her bachelor’s degree in journalism, she drove across country to Syracuse, NY to pursue her Master’s in Cultural Foundations of Education at Syracuse University. As of May 2024, she has completed her PhD, she simultaneously works with undergraduate students from underrepresented communities attending Predominately White Institutions. As a first-generation student herself, her work within higher education focuses on how universities can better support these populations of students.

**Lindsey Hamilton**, a dedicated activist-educator, is honored to be featured in this collection. As a mixed-race Pacific Islander woman in diaspora, L strives to intertwine her diverse experiences and spiritual wisdom to craft rewarding learning experiences for adults through writing, facilitation, teaching, and coaching. Based in Nashville, Tennessee, L infuses her professional mission with the richness of her lived experiences to embody the

principles of healing and holistic well-being with humor and joy. In her writing, L invites readers to embark on a profound journey of self-discovery and interconnectedness, illuminating the beauty that emerges when we celebrate and honor our identities, our differences, and our shared experiences. L holds degrees from Western Kentucky University and Johns Hopkins School of Education. Beyond her professional roles, L is a nurturing mother of three public school students, and the torchcarrier for Sylvania, Martine, Rose, Bonnie, and Sylvia.

**Jami Hinshaw** is passionate about creating access for a diverse student population. She believes students thrive best when offered a rigorous academic experience combined with a rich co-curricular environment. Hinshaw brings 20 years of experience in higher education. Before joining Waubensee, Hinshaw served as the Associate Dean of Students and Title IX Coordinator at Claremont Graduate University. Prior to that, she served as the Associate Dean of Students and Director of Residence Life at Notre Dame de Namur University. In addition, Hinshaw has held progressive leadership roles in student conduct, retention, campus programs, and student housing for many public and private institutions, including Portland Community College, Colorado State University-Pueblo, Regis University, and the University of Idaho. Hinshaw holds a Master's in Public Administration from Eastern Washington University and a Bachelor of Arts in Business Administration and Management Information Systems from Washington State University.

**Alexis E. Hunter (she/her)** is from Flossmoor, IL. Her family and identity as a triplet is very important to her and grounds how she employs practices of communal care. As a striving scholar-activist, her work seeks to honor the Black community's ingenuity and unwavering commitment to collective liberation. She is a third-year PhD student in the Educational Foundations, Policy, and Practice & Learning Sciences and Human Development programs at the University of Colorado-Boulder. At the intersections of healing, technology, and youth activism, her scholarship lovingly explores how Black youth are conceptualizing healing and leveraging technological advances (ex. social media) that systems of power have deemed as purely entertainment to prioritize collective wellness and advocate in ways that nourish their souls.

**Courtney J. Jones Carney (she/her), DPA, MBA** is an Assistant Professor and Program Director in the School of Graduate Studies, where she leads the Master of Science in Leadership for Organizational Change. In this capacity, she is responsible for the planning, implementation, evaluation, and continuous improvement of the MS program. In addition to her faculty

role, Courtney serves in an administrative capacity as an Assistant Vice President in the Division of Student Affairs. In this role, she provides strategic oversight to the Office of Student Success, Leadership, and Engagement, guiding efforts that advance a student success framework centered on community building, student leadership, civic engagement, and holistic support. Her leadership in at the University of Maryland, Baltimore reflects a deep commitment to excellence, student-centered graduate experiences, and the continuous integration of student feedback into institutional practice. Courtney is a proud alumna of Morgan State University and obtained a Doctor of Public Administration from the University of Baltimore.

**Jennifer Malone, EdD** received her Bachelor of Science degree in special education from Truman State University in 1985. In 1992 she earned an MA in special education and in 1996 an EdS in educational administration both from the University of Missouri. She earned her EdD in 1999 from Saint Louis University in the area of educational leadership. Dr. Jennifer Malone has been an educator for 38 years. She spent 18 years as a K-12 classroom special education teacher and 20 years as a K-12 principal. Her tenure includes the Kansas City Missouri public school district, Kansas City Kansas district, Topeka public schools, and Center schools. Dr. Malone served as an adjunct professor for 16 years at two different universities before becoming a full-time assistant professor at Missouri Western State University in the Department of Education.

**Latonia V. Moss** is a renowned educator and motivational speaker with over two decades of experience in higher education. She advocates for educational reform, emphasizing the importance of instilling soft skills in students to foster confidence and character. Dr. Moss is a passionate advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion in academia, addressing racial inequities within curricula. As a representative for Black students, she shares her own journey, highlighting education's transformative power in shifting her from delinquency to purposeful, upward mobility. Dr. Moss has contributed to various publications: "Exploring DEIA: Outside and Inside the Margins," "The Prophesied Place: Navigating a Career in Higher Education," and "Supporting Students of Color in Language Learning Environments." Beyond academia, she is a playwright, poet, and is currently working on her debut novel, "Mind the Glass." Dr. Moss is a dynamic force for positive change, using her diverse talents to impact education and beyond.

**Dr. Arah Parker** completed her Doctoral degree in Leadership for Educational Justice at the University of Redlands in April 2022. Dr. Parker's research interests include understanding and analyzing the lived experiences of African American/Black women employed in the higher education job sector. As an author, Dr. Parker is a contributing author to the

recently released book *Black Experiences in Higher Education: Faculty, Staff, and Students* (2023). Professionally, with more than 16 years of higher education experience, Dr. Parker has significant expertise in higher education business operations and diversity, equity, and inclusion for Black higher education professionals. Currently, Dr. Parker is chairing the University Advancement Anti-Bias Taskforce and the Black Thriving Initiative at Cal Poly Pomona. In her spare time, Dr. Parker enjoys traveling, conducting ancestry research for her family, and keeping her family history alive for future generations.

**Leticia Romo** is the Associate Dean of Students and Director of Residence Life & Conference Services at Pitzer College in Claremont, California. In this role, she oversees student housing, residential programs, and conference services, contributing to the college's commitment to student engagement and community building. With over 20 years of experience in higher education, Romo has held various leadership positions, including Interim Assistant Vice President of Student Affairs and Dean of Students at Pitzer College, Director of Student Equity and Engagement at Chaffey College, and Assistant Director roles at Western Washington University and Chapman University. Romo's academic credentials include a Doctor of Education (EdD) from Maryville University of Saint Louis, a Master of Education (MEd) from the University of South Florida, and a Bachelor of Science (BS) from Iowa State University. Her professional journey reflects a deep commitment to student development, equity, and community engagement, making her a valuable asset to Pitzer College's leadership team.

**Avina I. Ross (she|her|hers)** is a cisgender, Black, feminist womxn, sister, advocate, and mother to Langston Rise. She has worked in the domestic and sexual violence field for 16+ years with nonprofits, state government, and in higher education. Currently, she works as a grants manager for the Office on Violence Against Women, supporting the sexual assault services culturally specific program. Capacity permitting, Dr. Ross loves teaching sociology courses part-time. Former employers include Princeton University, Virginia's Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, and University of Mary Washington. In 2016, Dr. Ross earned her PhD in Social Work, from Virginia Commonwealth University, examining film portrayals of Black women's victimization. For joy, she strives to be fully present with family and friends. Her favorite pastimes are loving, teaching and playing with Langston, enjoying popcorn with wine, and driving her Hemi.

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**Qutina Watson, EdD** serves as an Instructor in Medicine and Course Director within Vanderbilt University School of Medicine at Vanderbilt University Medical Center, where she provides professional development instruction to medical professionals across the country. Dr. Watson received her bachelor's degree from Lane College (Jackson, TN), and a master's and Doctor of Education degrees from Capella University (Minneapolis, MN), with volunteer retention rates as her EdD dissertation focus. Dr. Watson was previously the Interim Assistant Vice President for Strategic Retention and Student Success at Wiley College (Marshall, TX). In her role as Interim Assistant Vice President, she provided leadership and oversight for efforts in retention, college access, and academic success. Dr. Watson has served in various roles as both an educational advocate and early childhood education administrator with 10 years of proven achievement in focusing on educational access and academic success. Dr. Watson is also a published author.

**Natasha Booker, PhD, LCSW** is a native of Connecticut. An accomplished social services practitioner and advocate, Dr. Natasha is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker with a special focus on uplifting Black women. She is the proud owner of Heart to Heart Counseling and Pathways to Wellness Women's Center. Dr. Natasha is also dedicated to enhancing the capabilities and leadership of nonprofit organizations. Beyond her professional roles, Dr. Natasha is a motivational speaker, purpose coach, and consultant. In 2014, Dr. Natasha was licensed to preach the Gospel. Her educational journey has been marked by excellence, culminating in a PhD in Human and Social Services. Her research focus centers on the mental health of Black women. Dr. Natasha, a mother of two sons, and is also a proud member of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Incorporated.

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# INTRODUCTION

For years I worked in environments where I was tolerated, not celebrated. Received significantly lower pay in comparison to my colleagues but required to do double, sometimes triple, the amount of work. Burnout quickly became a badge of honor for the sake of trying to justify my significance in the workplace. Looking for validation in my attempt to meet the unrealistic expectations of my supervisors. To the point where it almost cost me my life. Unfortunately, passing out in the emergency room and being placed on bedrest was the wake up call I needed. Changes in my personal and professional life had to happen, immediately. Prioritizing my mental wellbeing and standing firm on that. Not succumbing to the pressures of perfectionism. Essentially, mastering the inner critic so that I can shift from functioning in a performative way and live purposefully. Intentionally seeking out opportunities that would allow me to thrive in the workspace. Reporting to supervisors who supported the leader in me and genuinely wanted me to evolve. In 2021, I developed a workshop called “Escape the Cape” which focused on leadership development and emotional wellness. The purpose of the workshop serves as empowerment for individuals to minimize the pressure to perform and maximize the moment to produce. Not only did it challenge participants to break barriers and dismantle myths of professional development; it also refocused the lens of what leadership entailed. I presented at various conferences, professional development training, and seminars in the state of Maryland. Based on the responses I received from my workshop and the demand needed for me to continue the conversation, I recognized how critical it was for others to have a tangible resource at their fingertips. Hence, the birth of this book.

*When we create this falsehood mentality of what being super looks like, we mismanage the load that we are given. Capes conceal our capabilities. They shape our identity. It becomes a disguise from our reality. A cape does not make you powerful,*

**xviii** • Introduction

*your character does. I had to pull back the curtain and escape the cape. In a world filled with super women, I prefer to be Lois Lane. I refuse to allow the weight of my cape to diminish my humanity.*

*Signed.*

Tasha M. Wilson (*The Visionary*).

## CHAPTER 1

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# A LOVING INVITATION TO BLACK WOMEN: (RE) CONNECTING TO OURSELVES THROUGH THE EMBODIMENTS OF HEALING JUSTICE

Alexis E. Hunter  
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### ABSTRACT

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, continued heartless state-sanctioned murders of marginalized people, and the current political state within the US has only exacerbated the need for marginalized communities to take up healing. While ideologies around wellness have been conceptualized by those in power as an individual journey, Black women have long been countering these harmful, dominant ideologies by naming how transformative healing takes place when we (re)root ourselves in the ancestral traditions of healing justice (Ginwright, 2015; Page & Woodland, 2023). Healing justice requires us to tend to ourselves while we simultaneously engage in the lifelong pursuit of collective liberation (Annamma & Booker, 2020). As a Black woman, I write this self-reflective chapter to remind us that healing justice is an ancestral practice that helps us “return back to ourselves” by centering our holistic well-being. Thus, healing is a radical act of refusal that requires us to pause and care for ourselves in intuitive ways that counter antiblack and white supremacist tactics that encourage us to keep going until we experience racial battle

fatigue (Smith, 2004). I envision this chapter to be a loving invitation to Black women, who historically and contemporarily have always played an integral role in dreaming and designing more loving and just futures, to also “put the cape down” and recognize how self-preservation is critical to our livelihoods and a way we can actively disrupt white supremacy.

*Keywords:* Black women; healing justice; higher education; collective care; love

## OVERVIEW

As a triplet, my identity as a multiple deeply informs how I conceptualize care and move in the world, as I have always seen myself as an extension of my siblings. My identity as a triplet is such a beautiful part of my life and my anchor in many ways. However, as a Black woman, I also witness and experience the harms of how Black women are positioned as multiples. In society, we are socially constructed as caretakers, and therefore, we are expected to critically notice, see ourselves in relation to others, and respond to take care of our families, our communities, and the nation. Hurston (1937) uses the metaphor of “mule of the world” to describe how Black women are burdened with being overworked and mistreated.

When I was 18 years old, I left my predominately Black hometown in Illinois and embarked on my undergraduate journey, the expectation of being a multiple as a Black woman was intensified. My siblings and I had all chosen different schools, and for the first time, I had to navigate space without their physical presence. Although the transition to college was difficult, I was lovingly held by Black women mentors (students, staff, and faculty) committed to ensuring incoming Black students were surrounded by a loving community. With their care, I was able to adjust and find my stride. I majored in Secondary English Education and aspired to have a classroom of my own one day. While in undergrad, I held various leadership positions such as President of the National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE), President of Education Ambassadors, Resident Advisor (RA), Justice and Joy Undergraduate Researcher, all while maintaining honor roll status, and striving to be a present daughter, sister, and friend. I was attending a historically white institution (HWI), and so I also was leading student efforts for racial justice.

Although I loved being supporting initiatives that supported the Black students experience, I never noticed how involved I was on campus because I was so used to overcommitting and overextending. As Black women, systems are designed to normalize that we are set up to do twice the work for half the credit, and when we do not meet these expectations, we are disposed of. These are the consequences of white supremacist plantation politics that are designed to keep us depleted so that we are too tired to tend to ourselves—let alone revolutionize (Harris-Perry, 2011). The Black

woman superhero syndrome is designed to dehumanize and exhaust us. The responsibilities placed on Black women are dehumanizing because these expectations negatively impact our physical and psychological health (Huddleston-Mattai, 1995). Being in environments where my humanity was constantly disregarded was soul-crushing, and so I needed to lean into the life-giving powers of healing justice to process and recover.

Unfortunately, the experiences I had in undergrad are common for so many of us. James Baldwin powerfully names, “You think your pain and heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read” (Baldwin, 1995). Understanding that led to me applying to graduate school directly from undergrad to further explore the liberating possibilities of healing justice and explore how Black women are healing amidst the everyday violence of white supremacy. Healing justice is guided by ancestral traditions of historically excluded communities and is a “...community-led response to interrupt, transform, and intervene on individual/collective trauma to sustain our emotional/physical/mental/spiritual/psychic/environmental well-being” (Page & Woodland, 2023, p. 139). Healing justice is a critical and expansive departure from eurocentric mental health framings. This is necessary because westernized mental health practices are colorblind, reactionary, and temporary approaches to wellness that place the onus on the individual without transforming our social conditions (Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective, 2021). Healing justice is a guide for marginalized communities as we practice collective healing in ways that transform our hearts and environments (McGee & Stovall, 2015).

Now as a 24-year-old who is in the early stages of navigating Black womanhood and in the third year of my doctoral journey, I continue to recognize how radical and necessary it is to prioritize my well-being. My healing journey informs my personhood and my scholarship as I explore and strive to embody the everyday practices our communities leverage to heal. Admittedly, writing this piece has unearthed a bit of nerves because of the honor and responsibility I have been afforded to speak to such a sacred community that always uplifts and holds me. Black women historically have always played an integral role in dreaming and designing freer more humanizing futures, and my hope is my testimony will encourage you to pursue healing justice alongside me as we “put the cape down” and honor our full humanity. I write this with the hopes that by being a willing vessel, my vulnerability supports my own healing journey and inspires us all to “put the cape down.”

## TESTIMONY

A time when I felt like my voice was unheard was in Summer 2020 while I was an undergraduate. For context, as the US grappled with the state-sanctioned murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, my university

doubled down on preserving a statue of Thomas Jefferson that has been in the middle of campus since 2001 (Bacharier, 2020). Black students called for the removal of the confederate statue, but the institution refused. Miz-zou had been a challenging place for me to inhabit since I started my collegiate journey, and that summer only exacerbated the racial violence my community was experiencing. I was extremely disappointed yet unsurprised by my institution's lack of care for Black livelihood.

Furthermore, as a student in the College of Education, I was also processing that one of my beloved mentors was denied tenure. I wrote letters of support, met with the Chancellor to advocate for the institution to reconsider, supported a petition via [change.org](#)—which got over 15,000 signatures, and used Twitter to call attention to her scholarship and her immeasurable impact in the lives of Black students but unfortunately, the decision was upheld. The denial of her tenure highlighted once again the realities of brilliant Black women scholars who are rooted in social justice and collective liberation (Palomar et al., 2022).

As I grieved the loss of Black life and the denial of my mentor's tenure, I felt called to create a space to reflect and invite fellow undergraduate students to commit to racial transformations. I met with the dean of our college to propose a virtual open forum entitled “Beyond ESCP 2000: Moving Past Blanket Statements” and invited College of Education undergrads to grapple with what active allyship and standing in solidarity with Black folks might look like. The title was inspired by a required education course for all undergraduate students in the College of Education, *Experiencing Cultural Diversity in the United States*, housed in the Education, School, and Counseling Psychology (ECSP) program. The course was created to “examine cultural diversity in US Society, to increase self-awareness related to worldviews and beliefs about diversity issues, and to increase understanding of the intersections of multiple group identities” (University of Missouri, n.d.). Two of my dear friends offered to join me in facilitating, and on June 10th, 2020, we hosted our virtual forum to openly discuss why our devotion to collective liberation must be genuine and ongoing. Though the creation of this session felt necessary to address some of the issues present in our college, it was a lot of labor, and my friends were noticing the consequences on my mental health.

I learned so much through these experiences because the anxiety and exhaustion I was experiencing took a significant toll on my health. I was experiencing racial battle fatigue (Smith, 2004) and eventually had to completely step away from my organizations and commitments because I was so tired. Finally, I decided to “put the cape down” and ask for support. In return, I learned the sacredness of caring for my well-being from Black women during this time. Their guidance and reframing of what activism in our community can look like saved my life. Black women and the ancestral

practices of healing justice remind us that tending to ourselves is essential to communal care (Ginwright, 2015; Greene et al., 2021). They held my hand and reminded me that amidst our very harsh realities and violent systems, we need to lovingly invite ourselves and each other to return back to our ancestral practices that have been strategically hidden by white supremacy. I had not even realized that because of the spirit-murdering (Love, 2016; Williams, 1987) I was enduring, I had become disconnected from the people and practices that sustain me. I was offered something life-giving by Black women because rather than minimizing or ignoring my exhaustion, my mentors held and protected me. I was surrounded by love and encouragement as I began re-prioritizing my well-being. Surrounded by their love, I began to let go of the guilt and shame I felt and embrace healing as an abolitionist practice.

For me, healing justice has greatly influenced my personhood and leadership approaches. Embodying healing justice is helping me move more lovingly as I embrace healing as a lifelong endeavor that must be accompanied by our collective liberation (Ginwright, 2015; Greene, 2021). I understand that my commitment to healing does not remove or even lessen human suffering but rather helps me contextualize my personal and historical trauma in ways that support me in granting myself and others deep compassion. This has helped me pursue healing for the right reasons. Past efforts to care for my mental health were short-lived because I was only prioritizing my individual wellness so I could return to work. We deserve love, healing, and revolutionary care simply because we exist. Healing is a reclamation of our full humanity as we unlearn eurocentric perceptions of wellness that encourage us to take up individualized, temporary, and reactionary approaches to our well-being for productivity's sake. My trials have taught me that our healing must be centered on our holistic wellness because although engagement in advocacy works to transform the systems that harm us and can support our well-being, this labor takes an immense toll on our bodymindspirit (hooks, 1991; Lara, 2005). This framing allows me to notice how the communities I engage with are doing and make sure we are honoring our bodymindspirit. This is important to transforming environments so that holistic wellness guides how we engage in social justice work and how we show up in the world more broadly.

## **A LOVING INVITATION**

Healing is a life-long endeavor and a loving invitation we can extend to ourselves and our communities every day. I am on the continued journey of becoming undone and made anew simultaneously, and I lovingly invite you all to “put the cape down” and join me in:

## Learning to “let go”

A huge part of my healing journey has required me to become more introspective and reflective about how my hyper-independence prevents me from asking for support. I remember one evening in undergrad, my friend was in my dorm room watching me attempt to do a million things at once. I had just finished my midterm and was trying to create an agenda for my student organization meeting before we headed out to grab dinner and go to work. As I fumbled between stuffing my belongings in my backpack and creating a mental list for my organization’s meeting, my friend’s question caught me by surprise. She simply asked, “Why can’t you ask someone on the executive board to lead the meeting?” Truthfully, that was not even something that I had considered. I am constantly unlearning my hyper-independence and acknowledging that my ability to carry out tasks at the detriment of my own health is nothing to be proud of. I am learning how to pause to notice my capacity. I am learning how to truly lean into the community. I am learning that I do not have to “hold it down” and that by “letting go,” I can be transparent about my capacity and wellness (Greene et al., 2021).

## BEING IN COMMUNITY AS RITUAL

bell hooks (2000) powerfully reminds us that “Rarely, if ever, are any of us healing in insolation. Healing is an act of communion (p. 215). Healing is a sacred, communal act. These antiblack systems are designed to individualize, isolate, and remove us from life-giving, community-oriented spaces. If you are anything like me, in order to embrace and enjoy community means, you have to release westernized understandings of time. Being in community is an ancestral practice that is rooted in disrupting time. Ways we engage in this every day is by breaking bread with family and listening to music with friends. Being in community, by nature, helps us pause and focus on the “state of one’s spirit” (Somé, 1997, p. 26). When we feel like we do not have “time,” we are moving through the world at a speed that is unnatural to our bodies. When we engage in community as a ritual, we notice the importance of moving at the pace of our bodymindspirit and actively reject productivity culture alongside our loved ones.

## GIVING YOURSELF GRACE

While (re)committing to rest and healing is necessary for the survival of our spirits, I also recognize that this journey will be difficult as we navigate a world that renders us as nonhuman (Dumas, 2016). So as you “put the cape down” and encourage others to join you, please remember how sacred this journey is. Choosing yourself amidst the violence of empire and white supremacy is

one of the most radical and loving commitments you can make. Remind yourself every day that you are unlearning and embodying new practices while navigating the traumatic realities of white supremacy. Each day is an opportunity to try out the nourishing practices of self-preservation and move beyond hypocritical and restrictive framings that are designed to make you feel like you either “failed” or “succeeded.” We are more complex than those labels, and healing as practice opens us up to the continuous grace we deserve.

In the words of Audre Lorde, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare,” and because of the support of Black women’s ancestral knowledge around healing as a justice-oriented practice, I am continuing to learn that caring for myself is actually one of the deepest forms of communal care.

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